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ABSTRACT

This transcription of the keynote speech delivered at a conference on the black family is a discussion of the black family from an historical perspective. The presentation begins with quotations from ancient African literature and a discussion of the archaeological history of the African continent with references to authors who have used this historical information in their work on the modern black family. Parallels are drawn between the "healthy" black family and a common memory of historical and cultural values. Current problems confronting the black family are described including a change in the roles and potency of black social institutions, reduced control of black families over the socialization process of black children, and effects of popular media on the socialization of blacks. A greater institutional role is advocated to enhance black awareness and understanding of black culture and history: social institutions must combine resources and provide vehicles to communicate values, beliefs, ideas and history to blacks, and institutions must be developed to promote black economic development. (CG)

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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BLACK FAMILIES

Asa G. Hilliard III

(Keynote Address, National Urban League/National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Summit Conference on the Black Family, Nashville, 1984. Transcribed from tape)

The topic that I have been given to address is Historical Perspectives of Black Families. I will talk about the use of history and the use of culture in the preservation, survival, and enhancement of the black family.

In order to do that, I am going to start with a few brief quotations from some of the sacred literature of ancient Africa. I am going to do that because I find that many of our people do not even know, as people of African descent, that there was a body of sacred literature, from the earliest records, that has influenced most of that used in the world today. Therefore, it is fitting that I open with what the ancestors used to say.

One of them was Ptah Hotep. Ptah was the god of Memphis around the first to third dynasties in Egypt. Hotep means is pleased. So, if you say Ptah Hotep, that means God is pleased. I pulled out certain things from these sacred texts that had to do with families. I would like to tell you some of what African people thought about families. If we are going to do the historical perspective, we have to go back to the beginning of the history of African families in order to get the history of African American families. The first reading from Ptah Hotep is:

> If you are parents of worth and wisdom, train your children so that they will be pleasing to God. And if they do what is right, following your example, and handle your affairs as they should, do for them all that is good for they are begotten of your own heart and soul, therefore, separate not your heart from them. But, if they fail to follow your course, oppose your will, reject all counsel and set their mouths in motion with vile words, then drive them away, they are not your children and were not born for you.

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> Those who are guided do not go wrong, but those who willfully lose their way will not find a straight course.

Ptah Hotep continues:

> Share with your friends that which you have, for that which is yours is a gift of God. Those who fail to share with their friends are shunned for having a selfish soul. Although people might plan for tomorrow, they do not know what will come to pass. But, it is righteousness by which people are sustained. Therefore, if misfortune comes and you have been righteous with your friends, your friends will welcome you. But peace will not be found in a city where friends are forgotten and their needs not answered.

Ptah Hotep continues:

> If a son and a daughter accept the righteous teachings of their parents, none of their plans will go wrong. Teach your children then to be those who hear well and they will be valued by those of weight and substance and their speech will be informed by what they have heard. They will excel and their deeds will distinguish them. But, failure will follow those who hear not. The wise wake early in order to establish themselves, but fools always fail to rise at the opportune time.

Also, according to Ptah Hotep:

> If God grants you children, may the heart of their father and mother know them. Whoever hungers, let them be satisfied in the house of their mother and father and let them find there a wall which protects them. Be not without a generous heart, for it is God who gives you wealth.

Ptah Hotep continues:

> Double the gifts your mother gave you and care for her as she cared for you. She bore a heavy burden in you and did not abandon you. When she brought you forth after your months, she was still bound closely to you, for her breasts were still in your mouth for three years. While you grew, she cleaned your filth without saying "Oh, what can I do?" She placed you in school to be educated and came there daily on your behalf with bread and beer for your teacher. Thus, when you became a young man and marry a wife, eat not bread while another stands by without extending your hand to him or her. As for food, it is always here. It is men

> and women who do not remain. A person may be rich or poor, but bread remains with those who share it. One who was rich last year may be a vagrant this year. Therefore, be not anxious to fill your belly without regard for others. For you know not where your course will lead. If you become needy, another may be doing good by you. The water course of last year has disappeared, and, this year, another stream has appeared in its place. Great waters have become tracks of dry land and seashores have disappeared into the ocean's depths. No man or woman then walks in a single way. This is a lesson from the Lord of Life.

The last quotation comes from Ankshesange:

> May the elder brother of the town be the one to whom it is entrusted. May the kindest brother of the family be the one who acts as elder brother. May I have something and my relatives have something so that I may eat my own without holding back. May the flood waters never fail to come, may the field never fail to flourish. May children do honor to their father and mother. May the moon follow the sun and not fail to rise. May I recognize my friends, that I may share my goods with them. May I recognize my brother and sister that I may open my heart to them, and may life always follow death.

Recently, our estimate of the age of humanoids on the face of the earth was pushed back one (1) million years. Up until that time, the oldest human skeleton on the planet was found in Ethiopia near the Afar triangle. Her name was Lucy and she was 3.7 million years old. And, just recently, another skeletal find seems to push that back another million years making it almost five million years ago that people were on the continent of Africa. That find was in Kenya. Lucy was found in Ethiopia. Most of the fossil finds collected were found around the "navel" of the African continent, which sits on the equator. That navel we call Lake Victoria. From that naval, down the umbilical cord, stretching up to the Mediterranean, deposited at the mouth of the Mediterranean, is the fulfillment of a culture in Egypt. Here developed

the pattern of African growth which spans millions, not just thousands, of years.

It would be almost four million years before we would find people located on any other continent. For example, in Asia, it was only one million years ago. In Europe, it was only 500,000 years. Africa has been the birthplace of humankind, not just black people, but humankind. According to the best evidence that we have right now, in that cradle were born the people who then migrated over the rest of this planet and became the different peoples of the world.

Africa also held something back and then produced the first nation or civilization which was not Egypt but a place called Ta Seti, Land of the Bow, which is a few hundred miles south of Egypt on the Nile moving back into the area that we now call Nubia. It is from this place that Africans spent many years searching the heavens, watching the rise and fall of the Nile, and watching the pattern of life for animals and birds and fish. Being able to remain in one place, Africans produced a system of knowledge about how the world works and also produced what some people have called liberal arts studies.

It was this type of situation and civilization from which Cheik Anta Diop, probably the greatest historian of Africa living on the face of the earth today, produced a theory about families which he calls the Two-Cradle Theory. In looking at the families of Africa that were produced in that Nile Valley Cradle and comparing them to families that lived in other parts of the world--not in a pejorative way but simply in a descriptive way--Cheik Anta Diop found that in the north, people had to move around in order to live.

This did not give them an opportunity to make rigorous repeated observations about nature over the course of time. In the south, people could live on one spot. Indeed, for hundreds of generations, families did not have to move. So, the patterns of the universe were first seen in that Nile Valley, in that southern cradle.

In that southern cradle, certain types of family patterns were produced. Cheik Anta Diop calls them matrilineal, as opposed to patrilineal. In matrilineal families, the line of succession is reckoned through the mother. In looking at family patterns in the cradle of Africa and throughout the continent and comparing those family patterns to family patterns found throughout the rest of the world, Diop came upon another find: that the culture of the whole African continent, contrary to what scholars had said up until that time, was in fact one continuous culture. He called this finding cultural unity. Diop wrote a book, The Cultural Unity of Black Africa, which presented problems for him at the Sorbonne. Diop had to write three separate dissertation these in order to get out of school because he challenged the prevailing notion that Africa was simply a collection of different people.

People made a mistake looking at the surface of Africa. They saw Watutsies and "Pygmies" and they saw people in the north, in the south, in the east, and in the west with different physical appearances. They made the assumption that they lived different ways of life. However, Diop was able to show that African families basically lived the same way across the continent of Africa. They had the same legal system. They had the same family system. They had the same religious system. They had the same economic system. When these people moved, they took those systems with them. As a matter of fact, they brought them here--a long distance to the United States of America.

However, we have forgotten how to look at those things that we have brought with us. As a matter of fact, the people who started the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)--and especially DuBois. However, even DuBois in his wisdom, had to be tipped off, as it were, by Franz Boaz, his anthropology professor, that there were some things back on the African continent that would help him to explain black people. When he wrote his book, The Negro American Family, DuBois was able to write from the perspective of Africa. If you read that book, you will notice that DuBois first had to learn something about the history and culture of Africa before he felt that he could write knowledgeably about the black family in America. Thus, helping to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was not the only creative contribution that DuBois made to the understanding that we have today. Certainly, he helped us to understand black families in America.

We pick up what DuBois found in the work of some of the contemporary black family scholars, some of whom sit in this room today. For example, one of the most startling findings in the social science literature--I do not think that I have seen anything as stark as this figure in the social science literature--was reported in Robert Hill's book, Informal Adoption Among Black Families. There is a statistic in that book which is so startling that everyone ought to sit up and take notice. It is a figure which firmly connects the culture of African people in America with the culture of Africa.

That figure shows that black people basically (at the time that this study was conducted in the mid 1970s) did not give their children up for adoption. Black people did not give their children up for adoption if they were born out

of wedlock. White people (and again not pejoratively, but just to describe the family patterns) always gave their children up for adoption. Almost two-thirds of them would give their children up for adoption if they had a child out of wedlock. However, in the case of black families, children were almost always taken in. The figures came out to be something like 90 percent in opposite directions for both groups. In other words, what was happening to the black children who were being taken in? This was simply an expression of the same type of pattern found on the continent of Africa which black families in America had kept. It was one of those things that helped us to sustain ourselves over time.

Therefore, for this extended family pattern which we have talked about, we suddenly find that our research results have a foundation in our history. It was the grandmothers who were keeping these children. According to Robert Hill, the grandmother was almost twice as likely to take the child and keep the child as the child would be to take care of a grandparent in later years.

So, basically speaking, we have a clear African culture. I am not going to take time to go into all the details. I wanted to share enough so that you would know that we have a clear African culture which is retained in the culture of black people and that that culture had a function.

It does not do any good for me simply to cite the history of black people or to describe the culture of black people unless we know the use of the history and culture in some way that has meaning for us today. Plainly speaking, the healthy black family in America is the black family that has been able to maintain its clear connection to its history and its culture.

Stated in another way, the healthy black family, when it has been functioning on the best of terms, is a family that has a common memory. The healthy black family is a family that has common values. The healthy black family is a family that cooperates because of its common memory and common values. The healthy black family is a family that has a formal and informal educational system that takes place outside the public schools or anywhere else and is conducted by the family.

Ananse stories (the Spider stories), High John the Conqueror, John Henry, and all of those sayings that the parents used to have when they would take the time in the evening to tell the stories of the people to the young children are part of that family educative process. Of course, we do not do that now because our stories are now being told by folk who do not live inside the family.

The healthy black family also has a common identity. Now, why did I say healthy black family? Again, please remember, I am talking about the function of history and culture. If you were to go back in history and you were to look at the times when black people were successful in liberating themselves, it always came from the group that was closest to its history and culture. Go back to Haiti. Toussaint L'Overture comes out of a maroon family which had continued to honor, respect, preserve, and transmit its history and culture. Because of that, they were able to produce group unity.

If you go back to Surinam today, across the Caribbean Ocean, over on the north coast of South America, there are intact African families. Injukka, Coramanti, and Sarramanka happen to be three groups of people who retribalized. There were several tribes brought to Surinam but they got

together and formed three new tribes. Because they maintained a clear sense of history and culture, they were able to survive the attacks of people from the outside up until the present day. One of the most carefully developed intact African families anywhere in the western hemisphere is found there.

But the healthy black family can come under siege, as has happened. As a matter of fact, when you begin to look at the family patterns of black families today--you know what the statistics are--you see the consequences of the siege. For example, look at certain units or levels of the black family, such as the black male or the black female, or abused children. Those individuals represent the smaller units of the black family, the individual pieces of the black family; the second level would be the family itself as a unit; the largest unit of the family would be black people. I am talking about the big family, so I am talking about two families. Now, I want you to keep that in mind, if you will.

I am talking about two families: the big family which is the people, and the little families which are those that look more like the nuclear family. Beneath that, you have some black male/female relations. Many of the times when we are talking about family problems, we are only talking about a small piece of the problem as it presents itself to us.

Looking at some of those small pieces of the problem, we can see that certain things have been happening to black people over time--e.g., thirty years ago, it was unheard of for black people to commit suicide. It just did not happen. However, that is the leading cause of death for young black females today. More than 50 percent of deaths for young black females are attributed to suicide. This was previously unheard of in black families.

I have a friend who has been doing some work in counseling pre-suicidal people and asking the question, "What is it that is on the minds of people who later commit suicide or who are potentially suicidal?" Clearly, one of the things that is on their minds is that nothing is on their minds about themselves. They are just out here. As this friend said: "They are people who have no boundaries. They are people who do not know where 'I leave off' and someone else begins, for any number of reasons.

The black family comes under siege and we see it reflected in the statistics on suicide, on child abuse, on the splitting up of the family, etc. And, what is it that helps to explain what is happening when the black family comes under siege, and when it begins to exhibit these difficulties? My brother, Tom Hilliard, has identified some of the factors that have produced some of these problems.

Black people have had problems before, we have been oppressed before. This is not the first time that we have been unemployed. As a matter of fact, we have been both fully employed and unemployed; it does not seem to make any difference. During slavery, we are fully employed. But what is it that accounts for the fact that under current conditions we seem to be having more trouble than we have had in other times?

Tom suggests that, for the first time, there is a change in the roles and potency of our social institutions. I hope you see where I am leading because this does not get you to the same place that you might go if you thought only about the individual family members who are in trouble. You might say they needed therapy. But if the social institutions have lost their role and potency, it may be the institutions themselves that need the therapy prior to

the time that we go out and try to run workshops for individuals, or, at least we ought to work on them at the same time.

There is, then, a reduced control in the black community especially by black families over the socialization process of black children. This is what we have seen. It is not just that we are unemployed, or that we are out of work, or that we are having trouble with Ronald Reagan. In addition to all of that, we have seen a reduction in the control of the socialization process of black children by the groups that have their interests most at heart.

How has this happened? There are several reasons. First, through the reduced role of religion. Fewer people are involved in religion, especially the old time religion (the one that got us where we are). Second, the reduced role of schools in the socialization process leads to institutional impotency. As we have surrendered so many of the things that we used to control in schools, we have less to say about what the schools say about socialization-- if it chooses to say anything about socialization at all.

There is no role in the mass media for black people. That is one of the chief institutions that socializes black children. We do not really get to say what shows go on television, in spite of the fact that you can write a few letters which may affect the rating points a little. Basically, television producers and sponsors are going to put on The Jeffersons and Sanford and Son just like they have been putting them on before. That is also a loss of control over a major institution of socialization. Therefore, when you see the effects of that which is a child who does not know who he is or who she is and where they are headed, why would you work on the child instead of working on the institution??

There is a loss of historical perspective. In other words, the group has basically lost its memory. In psychology, we call that state amnesia. A person who has amnesia is dysfunctional because they do not know what time it is. They do not know where they are. That is what you need your memory--to tell you what time it is and to tell you where you are.

As stated, black people, the big family, not just the children, are now being raised by other people, not by ourselves. And the other people who raise us as a black family share their memory with us. There is nothing wrong with their memory for them. They share their memory with us, their history. They share their values. They even give us an allowance, since they are raising us. However, they do not share the control of the institutions that socialize us or our children.

What does that produce? Now, I have to walk real gingerly here because I know how everybody feels about our good friend, Michael Jackson. I do not want to say anything that sounds negative about Michael because, quite frankly, I really do not mean to. Yet I want you to think for a moment--because he is the model that most of our children have at this particular moment. They all have the little glove with the sequins on it. Michael is probably one of the most talented people I have ever seen. He is a beautiful person, a talented person. Nothing that I am saying here is intended to be negative about Michael as a person. I am talking about the role model that is being projected.

Here is this person who is so extremely talented that people begin to look not only at his talent but how he lives his life. They wonder when he cuts his eyes, why he had to do that. They wonder when he does surgery on his

nose, why he had to do that. They wonder why Brooke Shields is more attractive to him than almost anyone who grew up with him in the Los Angeles community. They wonder why Henry Fonda is thought by him to be the person who is most like a father. They wonder why Jackie Kennedy is going to write the memoirs. They wonder why the profits from Thriller produced Boy George. They wonder why he does not perform with his brothers. They wonder why his role model is Peter Pan. They wonder why he put Disneyland characters in his backyard. They wonder why he produced Thriller when he got his chance to give his message to the world. They wonder why he said what he said about Billie Jean when he had a chance to give his message to the world. I hope you have listened to the message on Billie Jean.

All I could think about when I thought about Michael's opportunity and the fact that if I got to the point where I had a chance to say something to the world and someone gave me the microphone was the phrase from a song written awhile ago: If I had a hammer, I would hammer in the morning, hammer in the evening all over this land. And what would I hammer about? I would hammer about danger. I would hammer out a warning. And, I would hammer out the love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land. That is what I would do if I had a hammer.

Paul Robeson was a talented man. He had a hammer and he hammered out a warning. William Marshall cannot get work because he uses his hammer to hammer our danger. Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis are not high on the ratings because they have talent with a hammer. Ellen Holly has a hammer and uses it every time she get a chance. Richard Pryor used to have a hammer before the

fire. Gill Scott Heron has a hammer. They hammer out the danger, warning, and love between brothers and sisters all over this land.

The consequence of the siege is that we fail sometimes to ask the right questions about African American families. Most of the time when we look at African American families, we ask questions about "what are they doing?" We ask questions about where they live, how much education they have. We ask questions about whether they are having babies too early or not. We do not ask about "what's on their minds?"

The disorder that we have in African American families is a disorder that has to be understood from the inside. If our memory is gone and we do not have any self-knowledge, it would not surprise you that when a person gets a hammer, that they hammer and build the wrong building. If the identity is not clear, it would not surprise you that we cannot hang together as sisters and brothers in unity. If we feel inferior inside--the double consciousness which DuBois wrote about--then it would not be surprising to you that you cannot get people to look at their own people as those whom they can trust and with whom they can work for their own self-determination.

It is inside, the consequences of the siege are inside. And, we do not ask sufficient questions about those consequences. It seems to me that it is obvious what has to be done. If, as I analyze this, there is any part of this that is right at all, then we have to do what all people do to take care of themselves in dangerous times and in dangerous situations.

It interested me when I served on the Board of the Chinese Education Center in San Franscisco that when the Chinese came to San Francisco, they integrated the schools. But, every night they went home and they were taught

math and reading, Chinese history and culture. Although the Japanese have integrated the schools in Atlanta, Georgia, every night (one hour a night) they take math, science, and Japanese history and culture at home. It interested me that when Jews go to school, they integrate; they live and love everybody. However, at night and on Friday and Saturday evenings, it is math and science and Jewish history and culture. As a matter of fact, they understand the role that culture plays in making a people strong and powerful.

Let me give you just one more example. Back in the 1800s, there was a man who single-handedly revived a dead language, a language that had been dead for two thousand years. When the State of Israel was established, it was not good enough to take English there. It was not good enough to take German there. It was not good enough to take Spanish there. This man, out of his love for Hebrew, decided that a language that had not been spoken by anyone in 2,000 years would be spoken first in his family for the first time in 2,000 years. His children were raised as the first two children to speak Hebrew as their native language in 2,000 years. The functional value of that was that at the time the State of Israel was established, they had a national language that enabled them to develop group unity. They can still integrate themselves all over the world, but they do not have to surrender themselves in order to do that.

I remember when the movie, E.T., came out a few years ago, I wrote an article about it which should be in print pretty soon. Since that was two years ago, I cannot remember exactly what I said; however, the title of my article was E.T.: An Afrocentic Transformer. Now, since society says we cannot produce Hollywood movies, the least we can do is use the ones they

produce for our own purposes. So I began to analyze E.T. for my purposes. For my purposes, E.T. became African American people. If you look at the rules that E.T. played by, E.T. had no problem hanging out in any kind of neighborhood. He integrated the family of the little boy. He played with the sisters and brothers. However, E.T. always had one goal in mind. Home! Home! He knew he had to get home!!

E.T. was so "sharp," that he took the toys and anything that they gave him to distract his attention and the next thing you knew, an umbrella, a "Speak-and-Spell" were turned into instruments that transmitted his message home. In other words, something that was supposed to be a receiver became a transmitter. This is typical of the creativity of black people. The one clear thing is that E.T. never forgot who E.T. was during the whole time that he existed. He was happy with everybody. When he became sick, even the people with whom he lived knew what his sickness was. Elliott said: He does not need anything but to go home. If you just let him go home, he will get well.

Now, you do not have to physically get up and move anywhere. Going home means going back into your head unerstanding, who is this person, where did I come from, and where am I going? Our social institutions that remain at this point and in this day and age must now be transformed. In other words, you are all here as leaders of organizations that affect this nation in ways that it has never been affected before. You have the power to do ten times as much. We have done ten times more than anybody else in our situation could have done, but we can do ten times more than that.

We have to do it, we will be able to do it only if our institutions are transformed. That is to say, every African American institution, in addition

to whatever else it does, must now become an educational institution. Every African American institution, no matter what else it does, must now take on the added job of becoming an educational institution. You cannot leave it up to television, nor can you leave it up to the families who themselves have not had a chance to find out who they were and where they came from, to do those jobs for you. You must do those jobs.

It is a shame when black scholars have produced reports and other literature and cannot get them published because publishers are not interested. One of the things major publishers were not interested in was The Journal of African Civilization, which is a reference book that every black family ought to have. It is a shame that The Destruction of Black Civilization was out of print for almost two years just because we did not take up our educational function. It is a shame that Carol Lawrence, in San Francisco, produced some children's films that would both make you proud and your children happy to see, and the National Endowment of Humanities had to produce those films for her because we did not take up the educational function on our own.

Our social institutions must be transformed to assume a leadership function in educating black people, not simply advocacy roles. I know you are already doing more than anybody has any right to expect anyone to do given the resources, the energy, and the time that we have. Most of us are fighting advocacy fights. However, I am saying, basically speaking, either you do it or it will not be done.

Social institutions have to be transformed to become institutions that perform a savings function. We make enough money, but we do not save enough money. Social institutions must be transformed--our organizations--to perform

a pooling function. That is to say, to take those things that we have saved in order to produce something for ourselves. It is a shame that as many conferences that we hold in this country, we cannot build a convention center somewhere in this country. I cannot believe that we cannot do that. I have watched people spend four to five million dollars for small organizations at conference, every year, some simultaneously, all across the country. We could build a convention center. We could build one, two, or three at a time, probably, if we took the time to manage and pool our resources.

Our social institutions must be transformed to provide a communications function. In other words, we need communications with a purpose. We need entertainment to communicate those values and beliefs, ideas, and history to our students, and we need news that we communicate. We cannot simply leave it to <u>catch as catch can</u>. We need a <u>mission control</u> so that the message that we need to get out to our people can be out there. We also need to transform our remaining institutions so that each one provides a needed spiritual function. We cannot just leave that up to our churches.

New institutions have to be created, if needed. We have been doing that. Some of those organizations may even be there. I do not know if Trans-Africa is here, or if the Black United Front is here. I think we have to be impressed with the National Baptist Convention and their attempt to utilize some of their financial resources for development activities. For the first time ever, we have a large organization like that with a concrete vision. Those are the kinds of things that we have to do.

In summary, it is our social institutions, extant or to be built, not the individual families in isolation, that must chart the course. If the social

institutions are incapable of the battle, the battle is over. It is the big family, and not the little family, that must be extended and transformed in its mission, in its strategies, and in its tactics.

In order to do this, a cultural base is an indispensable requirement for a sustained thrust. That is the key to mobilization and it is the key to direction. Civil rights and freedom are not enough. We need civil rights and we have to fight for them. We need freedom and we have to fight for it. However, we have to have some purpose over and beyond civil rights and freedom.

Economic development structures, especially when they are independently owned, must become high priorities for us, including banks that we run jointly, real estate that we can buy jointly, and media that we can produce jointly. Independent educational activities are absolutely essential goals and strategies that must be implemented by our institutions. Finally, national planning and development have to be managed and developed centrally.

One day a family of giants fell upon hard times. They came under siege! They were felled by stones and arrows from a determined foe! Soon the scavengers began to pick at their rotting flesh! They had fallen where the road gets rough! They had fallen when the going got tough in a hot dry land! In time, their bones were disconnected, dried out, and turned white! A voice of a passing stranger was heard to wonder: Can these dry bones live again? Can they be connected again? Can they hold flesh again? Can they walk together, children, and don't get weary again on our journey home to that great camp meeting in the Promised Land? No more weeping and wailing because there's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.